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Matter of Fact By Joseph Alsop

If the Prisoners Are Ransomed

BEFORE MUCH time has passed, the widespread demand to "do something about Cuba" may well be satisfied in an unexpected fashion. Fidel Castro's haul of prisoners from the Bay of Pigs may well be ransomed.

The men whom Castro caught have been rotting and starving in his jails for a great many months. For most of them, it is beginning to be a case of now or never. Nonetheless, if President Kennedy moves to ransom them at this juncture, it will prove that he has a much stronger conscience than most Republicans appear to think.

NO DOUBT the President will seek to safeguard himself on the political front before any ransom agreement is announced. No doubt it will not be called a ransom agreement. But no amount of contriving will make the act of paying ransom to Castro either palatable or popular.

On the other hand, the President's choice is clear. Either he can pay the ransom, and bring the prisoners home. Or he can leave them to rot until they die in Castro's jails, and thus he can have their deaths forever on his conscience and his country's conscience—for it was Mr. Kennedy, acting as President of the United States, who authorized the unhappy landing in the Bay of Pigs. Or he can use military force to make Castro yield these men up—which he is not ready to do, at any rate at this time.

IF THE WORLD situation forbids the third alternative, and if the prickings of conscience outlaw the second alternative, then the first alternative is the only one open.



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For these reasons, the first alternative, of liberating the prisoners by paying ransom to Castro, has apparently been chosen. Even the temptation to wait until after the November election—which must have been a very great temptation—will apparently be resisted.

There is a Scotch saying that a man must "dress his own word," which means, very roughly, that a man must have the guts to pay for his own words and stand up to his own fate without undue complaint. Mr. Kennedy seems to be obeying this grim injunction in the present instance, and in a way that is not common among politicians, especially in an election year.

THE SIMPLE fact that this essential moral choice must now be discussed in election-year terms both illustrates and emphasizes a new phenomenon of great significance. Partly because of the mood of the country, and partly because a good many Republicans would have it so, foreign policy is becoming a primary factor in domestic party politics.

Unpublished national polls show an immense majority of the country favoring a blockade of Cuba, for instance. It is pretty clear, therefore, that President Kennedy could stir the country to its depths and lift it partly from the doldrums by the simple act of entering a moral challenge. Since the summer of the last year, when this situation has been produced by the changes in the long contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. There was no public pressure on President Truman to intervene in Korea, or on President Eisenhower to stand off the Chinese Communists at Quemoy, or on President Kennedy to adopt a bold,

firm course in South Vietnam.

Now there is public pressure, not only with respect to Cuba, but also, less dramatically but no less insistently, with respect to Berlin. Furthermore, although few people realize it, Berlin ties the President's hands in the Cuban situation, at least for the present.

The point is that the Berlin crisis at last appears to be nearing a climax. If fighting is avoided during this climax, it will be very surprising. Fighting need not, and probably will not, lead to an H-bomb war. Yet the oncoming climax in the Berlin crisis is plainly going to be a horribly risky and breathless business.

As the President himself told the congressional leaders at a briefing a few days ago, the delicate and dangerous task of meeting the expected challenge at Berlin must not be complicated by the Cuban problem. That the Berlin corner must be rounded, in short, before the final choice is made, to tackle or not to tackle the Cuban problem.

In the present mood of the country, if he fails to meet the challenge of Berlin, he may as well send his resignation to the Senate. If he meets the challenge and if there is an H-bomb war, Cuba will not matter very greatly. But if Mr. Kennedy meets a Berlin challenge with success, and without an H-bomb war, the whole world situation will be incalculably but favorably altered, and the mood of the country will also be transformed.

THESE ARE the basic, realistic calculations that now govern the Administration's actions. But since the country is so particularly Cuba-conscious, it will be a bold act, to take time off from preparing for the Berlin climax, in order to rescue the men at the Bay of Pigs from Castro's cruel grip.

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